

Robbin Rhode

March 11–
June 6, 2010

LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART





“From cave painting and from Duchamp, I began to understand the differences between the bicycle as an object, a representation, and an art object . . .”¹

In 1998 South African artist Robin Rhode chalked the image of a bicycle on a Johannesburg city wall, and then attempted to ride it. The “action” is captured in a series of photographs in which the artist fails to mount the “bike,” then checks the “tires” and “chain,” before finally grabbing the “handle bars” and “pushing” it away. The idea for the piece, *Classic Bike*, is based on a childhood initiation rite in which senior pupils force younger ones to interact with objects drawn on school lavatory walls. The notion of engaging directly with a drawn representation of something as if it were an actual object—or “performative drawing”—has become Rhode’s primary mode of expression for more than a decade.²

Born in Cape Town in 1976, Rhode moved in 1984 to Johannesburg, where he studied art at the Witwatersrand Technikon from 1995 to 1998, and then film at the South African School of Film, Television and Dramatic Art until 2000. He describes himself as a “post-apartheid kid,” and he is in a position to know the advantages as well as the responsibilities that come with the role as he is himself “colored” (of mixed ethnicity). Coming of age following apartheid, Rhode appreciates the opportunity to “develop an authentic visual language that relates to a democracy being realized.”³ This language combines not only drawing and performance but also photography and the cinematic device of the storyboard. In essence, Rhode has brought together various media that historically have been considered secondary (to painting and sculpture, that is) to create his signature style.

Scap and Water. 2007. Soap, steel, bronze, and water, 74 x 45 x 12 in. (bicycle), 12 x 13 x 12 in. (bucket). Sender Collection



Juggla (details), 2007. Twenty digital pigment prints, 20 x 14 in. each, 113 x 62 in. overall. Sender Collection

Since 2002 Rhode has been based in Berlin, but he returns regularly to South Africa: "In South Africa I feel that I have room to maneuver in a space that's undefined, that the framework of modernity has not captured or enclosed the street..."¹⁴ (Not to mention that drawing on public walls in Berlin will certainly get you arrested.) But living in Berlin and working in a studio has offered Rhode a different context and viewpoint, and he has turned away from creating art in public: "I have begun instead to adhere to a more analytical approach to the processes of art, which is a typical German trait I have come to appreciate."¹⁵

Rhode's earliest pieces, however, were performances, with or without an audience, on the streets of Johannesburg. In 1998 he began using photography to record his (or a doppelgänger's) interactions with his drawings, resulting in photocompositions and video animations that look like disassembled flip books or stop-action films. These early works inevitably evoke comparisons with the photographic motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge as well as the draw-and-erase animated films of fellow South African artist William Kentridge. This exhibition includes works made over the last three years—including photocompositions, video animations, an object, and a site-specific wall drawing—which represent Rhode's ongoing interests in urban street culture and his South African identity, as well as more recent concerns with opacity, or the study of light and vision.

The bicycle appears in Rhode's work more than any other image.¹⁶ For the artist, it signifies mobility as well as desire. Since very few children in his Johannesburg neighborhood actually owned a bike, he thought that "maybe the bike drawn on the toilet wall reflected the dimension of desire, of almost attaining that freedom, that sense of ownership."¹⁷

In *Soap and Water* (2007), Rhode continues to employ the representation of the bike as a symbol of desire. As with his chalk drawings, the medium is potentially impermanent. A life-sized bicycle made of Sunlight, a popular bar soap in South Africa, lies on the floor next to a metal bucket filled with water. The proximity of the soap and the water suggests the possibility of the bicycle dissolving away, leaving only a sudsy mess and a memory.

"I wanted the sculptures to embody an ephemeral or performative function," says Rhode. "They're something like potential props, or theatre pieces. I don't see them as classical sculpture: I don't see them as fixed."¹⁸

Rhode's interest in performance and theater is also evident in his choice of subject matter. In the photocomposition *Juggla* (2007), an anonymous black man in bedraggled clothes and a top hat enters the frame and appears to juggle two black balls that double as hands. Inspired in part by a famous Cape Town carnival (colloquially known as the Coon Carnival and officially as the Cape Town Minstrel Carnival) that involves numerous street performers, Rhode clearly alludes (through his costume choice and use of "old-fashioned" black-and-white photography) to the problematic history of minstrelsy. The origins of the Cape Town carnival extend back to the mid-nineteenth century when black minstrels from the United States first toured South Africa. Although widely considered racist today, minstrelsy is also regarded as an early expression of American, especially African American, theater and performance. *Juggla* also has European theatrical roots and is related to the Bauhaus artist and choreographer Oskar Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet* (1922), in particular to the character called the Turk, who has cymbals for hands. Rhode's *Juggla* has similar circular appendages that "change hands" as a result of being tossed. Like Schlemmer, Rhode is interested in exploring the relationship between the human body, geometry, and space. While Schlemmer employed the three-dimensionality of the stage to articulate his vision, Rhode uses a liminal, or in-between, space created through the fusion of the traditionally two-dimensional field of drawing with the three-dimensional field occupied by the human body. The glue that holds these two distinct realms together is the suspension of disbelief. Although the viewer understands that logically 2-D is 2-D and 3-D is 3-D, and never the twain shall meet, she accepts the illusion, much as one does when watching a play.¹⁹

According to the artist, "this space or dimension is only accessible through the imagination, unlike our reality that includes certain things while excluding certain others. This imaginative space harbors a desire to look at the world anew using humor



Promenade (stills), 2008. Digital animation, 5 min. Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York.
Photo: Tucci Russo Studio per l'Arte Contemporanea, Torre Pellice

and play to destabilize the unseemly. Humor and gesture become important catalysts in connecting directly with the unconscious. . . . [and the] disruption of our experience of the real."¹⁰

Rhode's imaginative space recalls the utopian visions characteristic of early-twentieth-century art movements like surrealism and constructivism. The former sought emancipation from the conscious mind through drawing, among other visual strategies, and the latter attempted to achieve the same goal through the objectivity of geometric forms. Both drawing and geometry are central to Rhode's compelling and innovative form of expression, which invites playfulness and suggests a willingness to dream. It is no coincidence that drawing and the manipulation of elementary shapes, as well as playacting, are among a child's first creative exploits. "Children can help us reach a more poetic dimension," says Rhode.¹¹ And there is also an element of mischief to his work, which is related in part to the anonymity granted by Rhode to his street performer characters, their identities shielded by hats, hoods, or stocking masks.¹² The ultimate ruse, however, is that of the artist, who gets viewers to willingly partake of his illusions.

In the video animation *Promenade* (2008), a performer sports the unlikely combination of a suit, tie, and stocking mask. Accompanied by a piano score composed by Rhode's friend, the musician Arenor Meyer, the "promeneur" saunters backward onto the "stage" before taking a deep bow and making emphatic gestures to draw the viewer's attention overhead.¹³ Diamond-shaped forms in chalk burst gently above the performer, who strikes a series of playful poses suggesting joy and wonderment. Suddenly, the diamond shapes turn ominous: the pointed ends begin to face downward, creating a serrated edge that descends and eventually, surrounds and traps the performer. With a bow of his head, the diamonds recede from above and from the sides, and eventually, they contract into a single diamond that he pinches neatly between his index finger and thumb. He then strikes a pose, as if the act had been planned all along. The performer made us look and Rhode got us to believe.

**"Children can help
us reach a more
poetic dimension."**

In discussing his growing interest in geometric forms, Rhode states, "I've been fascinated by the dynamism of the diamond form—the sharp points and angles, the cutting, the implication of the infinitive, and that the shape can rotate or be placed in any direction—and, also, more importantly, that the form disperses light, therefore affecting optics, distance, perspective and so on."¹⁴ Most of these aspects of the diamond are addressed in *Promenade*: it transforms from an object of wonderment to one that cuts to one that emanates fractured light. Diamonds also have particular significance in South Africa, home of the diamond manufacturer DeBeers, and in Africa, in general, as a continent dealing with the issue of "conflict diamonds," which are illegally mined and sold to finance local wars.

The diamond shape also appears in *Kite* (2008), an installation that includes an image of two hands (the artist's own) that "grasp" strings attached to a kite-shaped projection of trees viewed from below in a moving vehicle. The footage was shot during a 2008 visit to New Orleans, and as the film proceeds, the image speeds up, until the treetops fuse into a blurry torrent suggestive of the devastating flood that inundated the city during Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The (failed) human attempt to harness nature is the most direct interpretation of the work, but it also alludes to artistic attempts to "capture" nature through pictorial means—namely, linear perspective.¹⁵ In this context, the two "strings" become perspectival lines that appear to provide a link between the hand of the artist and nature's representation. Yet, in reality, these same strings are not at all direct but actually bend around the corner of the gallery wall; the lines themselves are part of the illusion.

Rhode's interest in opticality is also apparent in the photocomposition *Pan's Opticon* (2008). In this series of fifteen photographs, a black man in a black straw hat viewed from behind appears to be drawing with an architect's compass that projects from his eyes. The resulting circles, reminiscent of constructivist forms like those of El Lissitzky, for example, slowly proliferate to fill the wall and then gradually disappear, leaving two dripping—crying or bleeding—spots of ink.

The title *Pan's Opticon*, plays on the *panopticon*, English social theorist Jeremy Bentham's late-eighteenth-century design for a circular prison building that allowed constant observation of inmates without their knowledge. According to Bentham, panoptic design offered a "new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind."¹⁶ The forms created by the compass clearly refer to the panopticon's circular design, and the figure (Pan?) stands in a corner, a childhood form of incarceration. In Greek mythology, Pan is depicted as a libidinous creature—half man—half goat, often with an erect phallus—and is associated with fertility and with the season of spring. In this context, the compass becomes not only a tool of disciplinary societies but also signifies, perhaps, the gaze as what the critic Jean Clair has called the "erection of the eye." For Clair, the voyeuristic gaze was born out of sexual desire but may also apply to notions of surveillance.¹⁷ The philosopher Michel Foucault employed the panopticon as a metaphor for penal societies intent on normalizing unconventional or extreme behavior via controlled observation.¹⁸ In *Pan's Opticon*, the black man is the subject of the gaze, yet he is himself trapped in a corner (emphasized visually by the tightly cropped image). All this refers perhaps to the uncertain and transitional situation of black and "colored" people in South Africa.

In his unique and enthralling practice, Rhode deftly negotiates South African culture, the history of art, opticality, and related politics of vision. He takes the serious topics of race, politics, and visual culture and presents them in an innovative and compelling *mise-en-scène* that enchants as much as it enlightens. In Rhode's words: "One can take pleasure and still remain critical at the same time."¹⁹

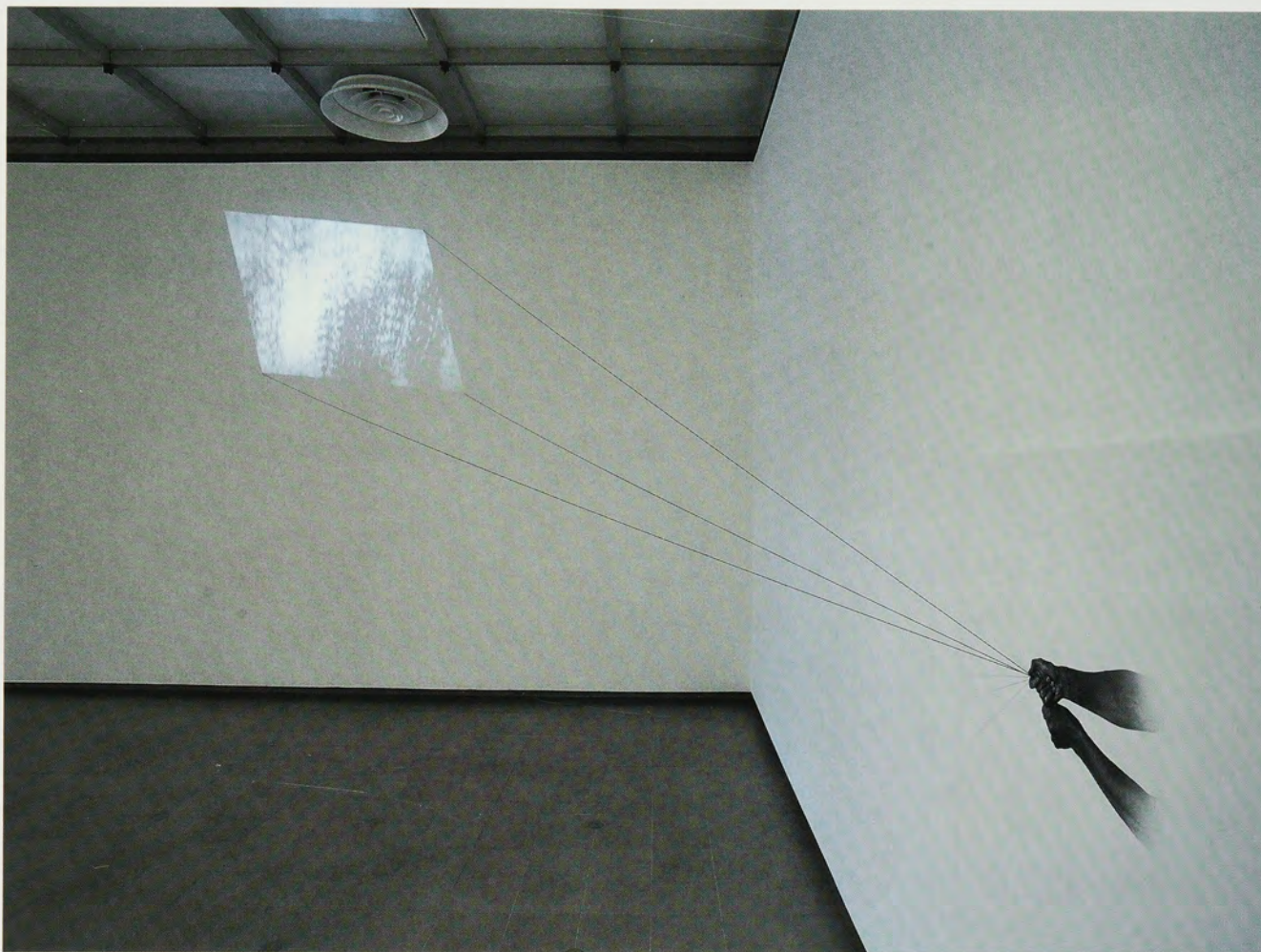
Leslie Jones

Associate Curator, Prints and Drawings

I would like to thank Perry Rubenstein for his enthusiastic support of this project from the very beginning and Caroline Dowling, former director of Perry Rubenstein Gallery, for her collaborative spirit and tireless efforts in making it happen. Thanks are also due, of course, to Robin Rhode, whose creative energy is as infectious as his work is inspiring.

Notes

1. Robin Rhode, interview by Catharina Manchanda, "Robin Rhode and Catharina Manchanda in Conversation," in *Catch Air: Robin Rhode*, exh. cat. (Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, 2009), 23.
2. The term "performative drawing" was coined by James Sey to describe Rhode's work. See Sey, "Jozi Juice," in *Robin Rhode: Who Saw Who*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Publishing, 2008), 20.
3. Interview in *Catch Air*, 22.
4. *Ibid.*, 19.
5. Robin Rhode, interview by Stephanie Rosenthal, "Robin Rhode in Conversation with Stephanie Rosenthal," in *Robin Rhode: Who Saw Who*, 49.
6. Examples include: *Classic Bike*, 1998; *New Kids on the Bike*, 2002; *Soap and Water*, 2007; and *Parabolic Bike*, 2009.
7. Robin Rhode, interview by Stephanie Rosenthal, "Walk Off," in *Robin Rhode: Walk Off*, exh. cat. (Munich: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 9.
8. Robin Rhode, interview by Martin Herbert, "Robin Rhode," *Art Review* 25 (September 2005): 55.
9. As pointed out by Michele Robecchi, Rhode's use of drawing is akin to staging a theatrical set that is "framed and reliant on the spectators' predisposition to forgetting the surrounding environment and accepting the tacit rule that the action happening in that rectangular space is actually true." See Robecchi, "Handwriting on the Wall," in *Robin Rhode: Who Saw Who*, 86.
10. Interview in *ibid.*, 49.
11. Andrea Bellini, "Robin Rhode: The Dimension of Desire," *Flash Art* (October 2005): 92.
12. For a discussion of Rhode's work in terms of "crime scenes," see André Lepecki, "Smudger," in *Robin Rhode: Walk Off*, 19–25.
13. *Promenade* was originally conceived as part of a collaborative project with the Norwegian pianist Leif Ove Andsnes, who performed Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* in conjunction with video animations created by Rhode. The project, titled *Pictures Reframed*, premiered at Lincoln Center, New York, in fall 2009. The video animation shown here is an extended version set to an original score by Arenor Meyer.
14. Interview in *Robin Rhode: Who Saw Who*, 52–53.
15. Rhode refers to an illustration in the French artist Abraham Bosse's manual on perspective, *Manière universelle de M. Des Argues, pour pratiquer la perspective par petit-pied, comme le géométral* (1648), as a reference for *Kite*.
16. Jeremy Bentham, quoted in *The Panopticon Writings*, ed. Miran Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995), 29–95.
17. Jean Clair, *La Pointe à l'oeil*, trans. and quoted by Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Reconsidering Erotic Photography," in *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 229.
18. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).
19. Khwezi Gule, "At the Centre's Edge," *artsouthafrica* 4, no. 1 (spring 2005): 29.



Kite, 2008. Pigment print mounted on Sintra with aluminum brace, DVD projection, and string, 60 x 44 in. (print), installation dimensions variable. Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York. Installation photo: The Hayward, Southbank Centre, London. Photo by Roger Wooldridge

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and made possible by the Contemporary Projects Endowment Fund. Contributors to the fund include Mr. and Mrs. Eric Lidow, Ronnie and Vidal Sassoon, Steve Martin, The Broad Art Foundation, Bob Crewe, Tony and Gail Ganz, Ansley I. Graham Trust, Peter Norton Family Foundation, Barry and Julie Smooke, and Sandra and Jacob Y. Terner.

Education programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are supported in part by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, the William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund for Arts Education, and Rx for Reading.



Art & Music concert series is supported in part by the Estates of James B. and Jane C. Welton, and the Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Inc. In-kind media support for Art & Music is provided by Classical KUSC FM 91.5.

Join LACMA for FREE museum admission all year!

You'll also receive two free tickets to specially ticketed exhibitions, and much more. Visit lacma.org, a LACMA Welcome Center, or call (323) 857-6151 to join.

Brochure © 2010 Museum Associates/LACMA. All rights reserved.

All artwork © Robin Rhode. All photographs courtesy of the artist and the Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York. See image captions for additional credits.

Cover:

Pan's Opticon (detail), 2008. Fifteen digital pigment prints, 18 x 28¹/₈ in. each, 61¹/₄ x 154 in. overall. Perry Rubenstein Gallery, New York. Photo: White Cube, London

Related Events

Conversations with Artists:

Robin Rhode and Leslie Jones

Thursday, March 11, 7 p.m.

Join LACMA curator Leslie Jones in conversation with Robin Rhode. Hear about Rhode's experience growing up in South Africa, his recent work, and the site-specific work created for the exhibition at LACMA.

Brown Auditorium | Free, tickets required. Tickets available one hour prior to the event

Christopher O'Riley, piano

In Celebration of the *Robin Rhode* Exhibition

Thursday, May 27, 8 p.m.

From his groundbreaking transcriptions of Radiohead to his powerful interpretations of classic and contemporary repertoire, pianist Christopher O'Riley has redefined the possibilities of classical music. For his LACMA debut, he will be performing a wide-ranging program featuring music by Radiohead, Thomas Adès, Tori Amos, and others. In addition to his acclaimed international piano performances, O'Riley also hosts NPR's popular series *From the Top*. The performance will be preceded by the West Coast premiere of two new video animations by Robin Rhode.

Bing Theater | Ticketed

On the occasion of this exhibition, the artist has created a limited-edition print, which is available at the museum's new bookstore, Art Catalogues, on the first floor of the Ahmanson Building.

LACMA